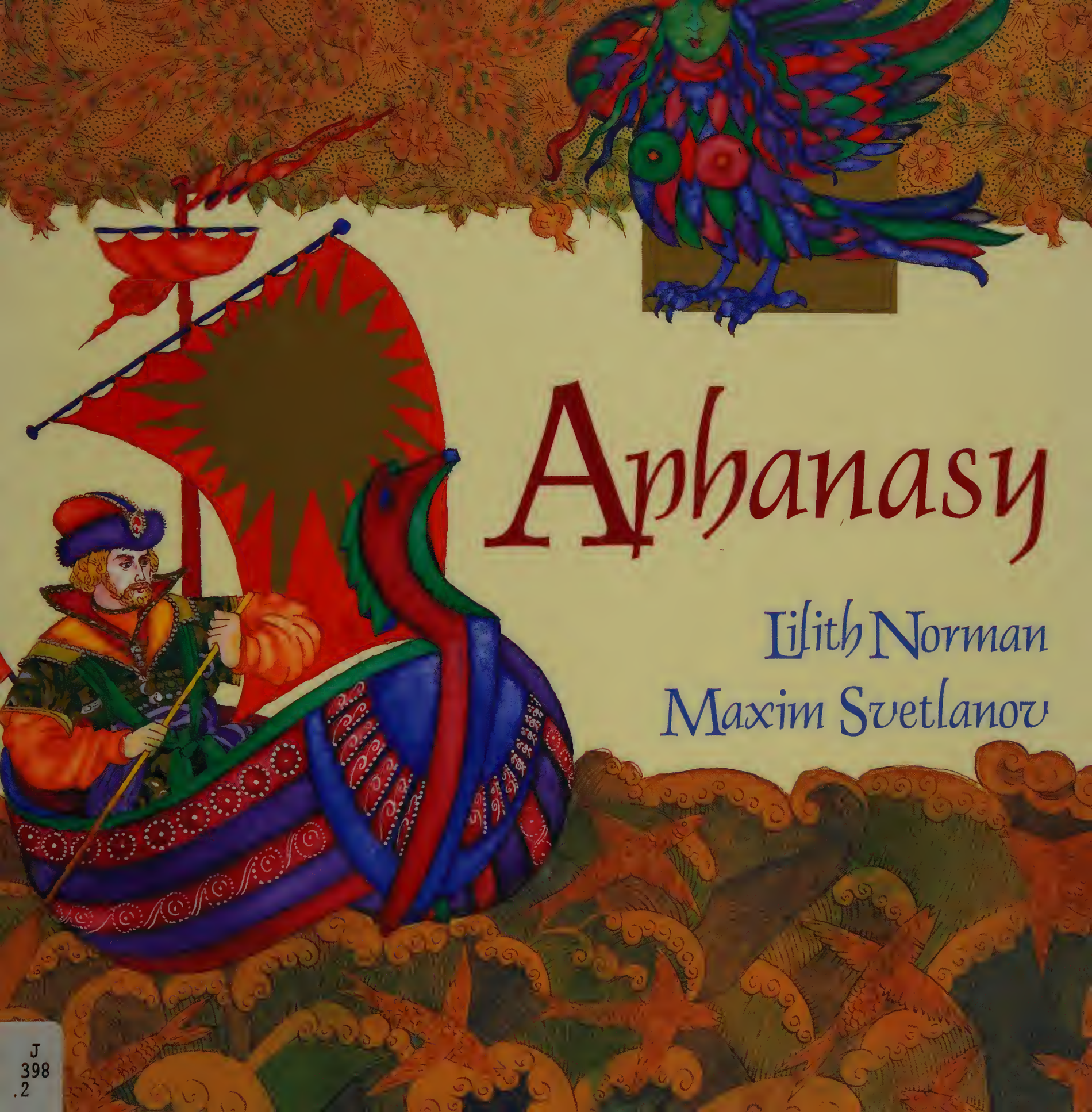

Aphanasy

Lilith Norman

Maxim Svetlanov

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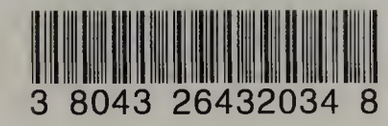
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For Nan Hunt — *friend.* LN

To my sons, Vladimir and Michael. MS

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illustrated by Maxim Svetlanov

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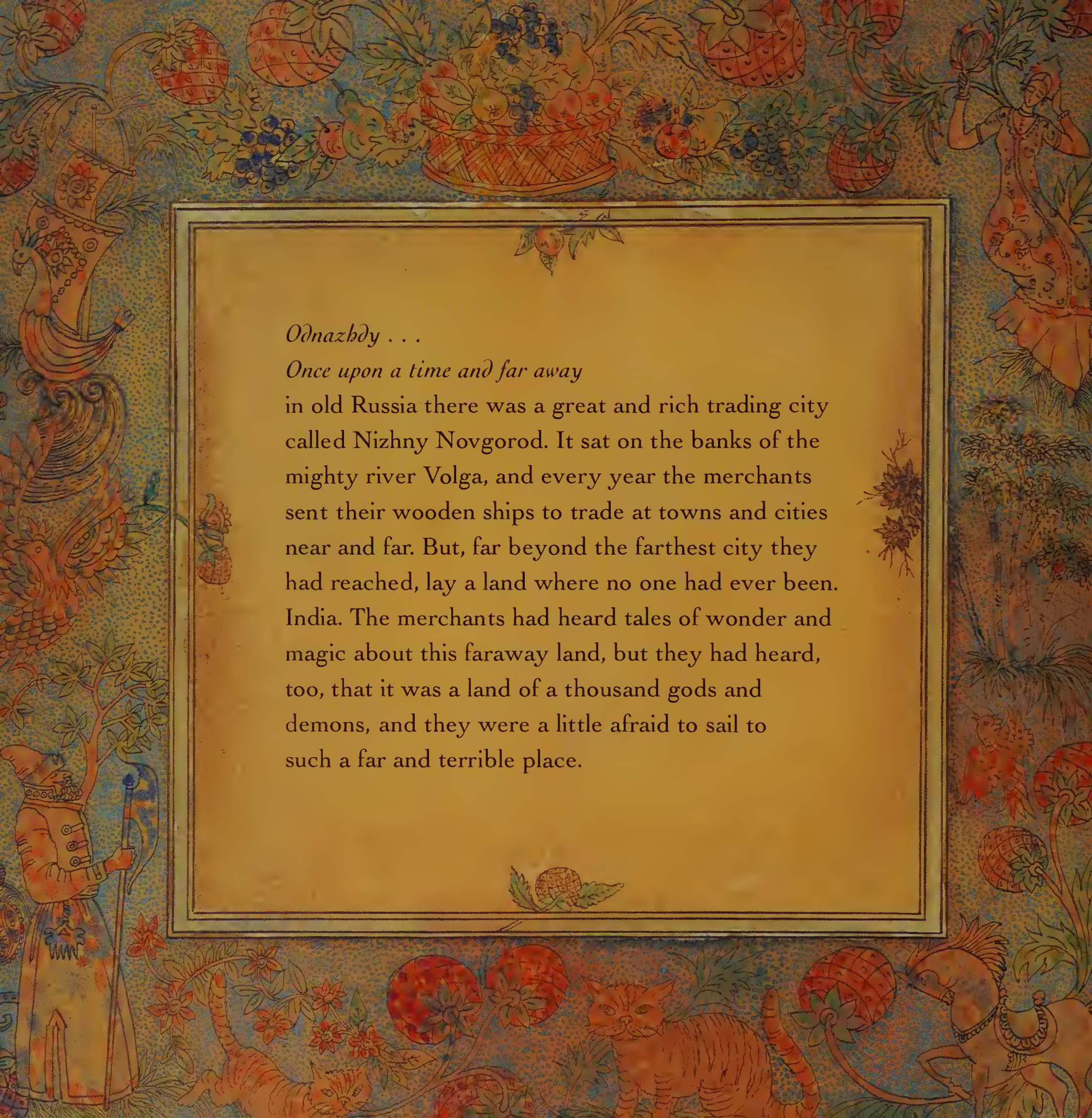
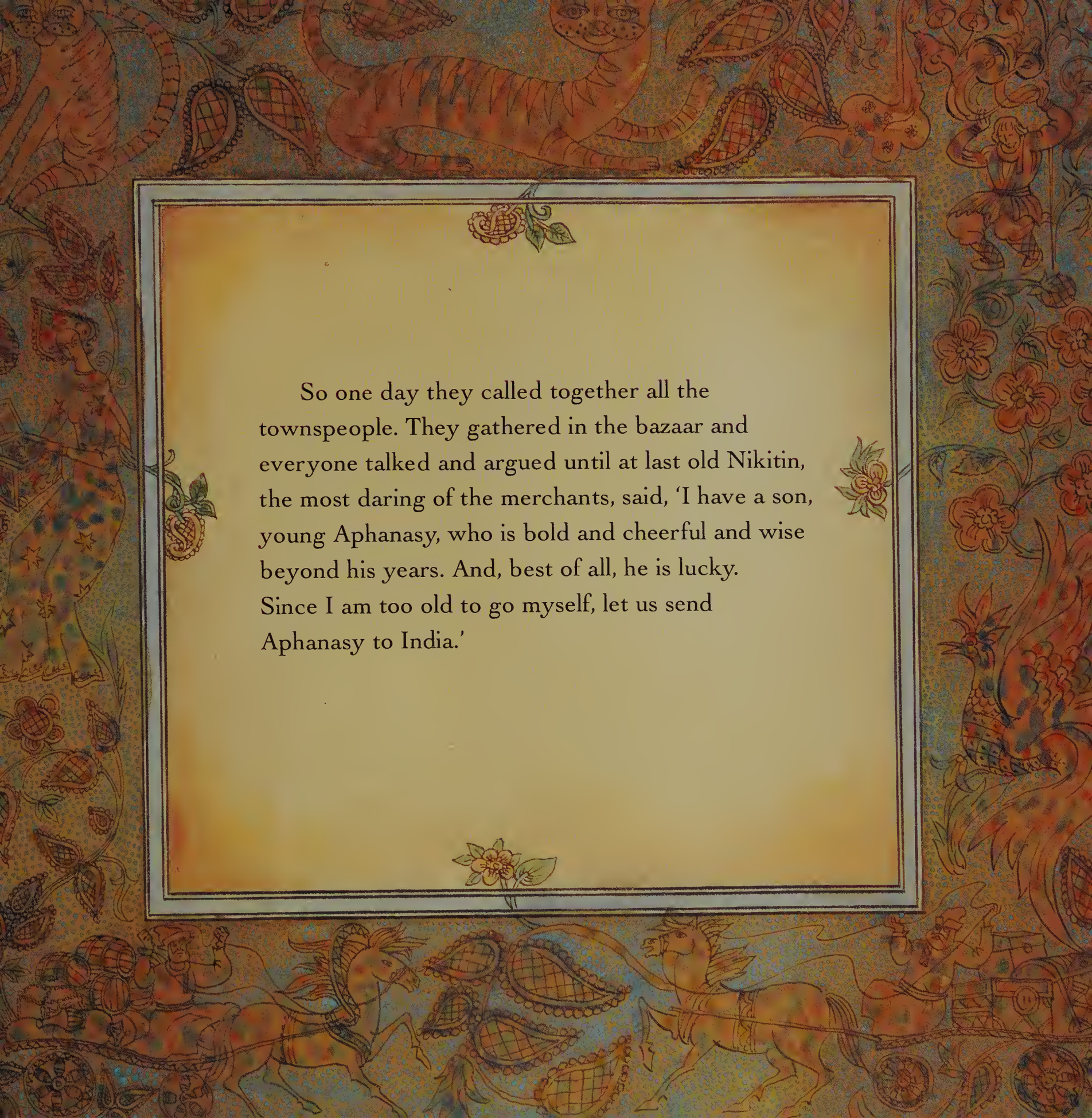


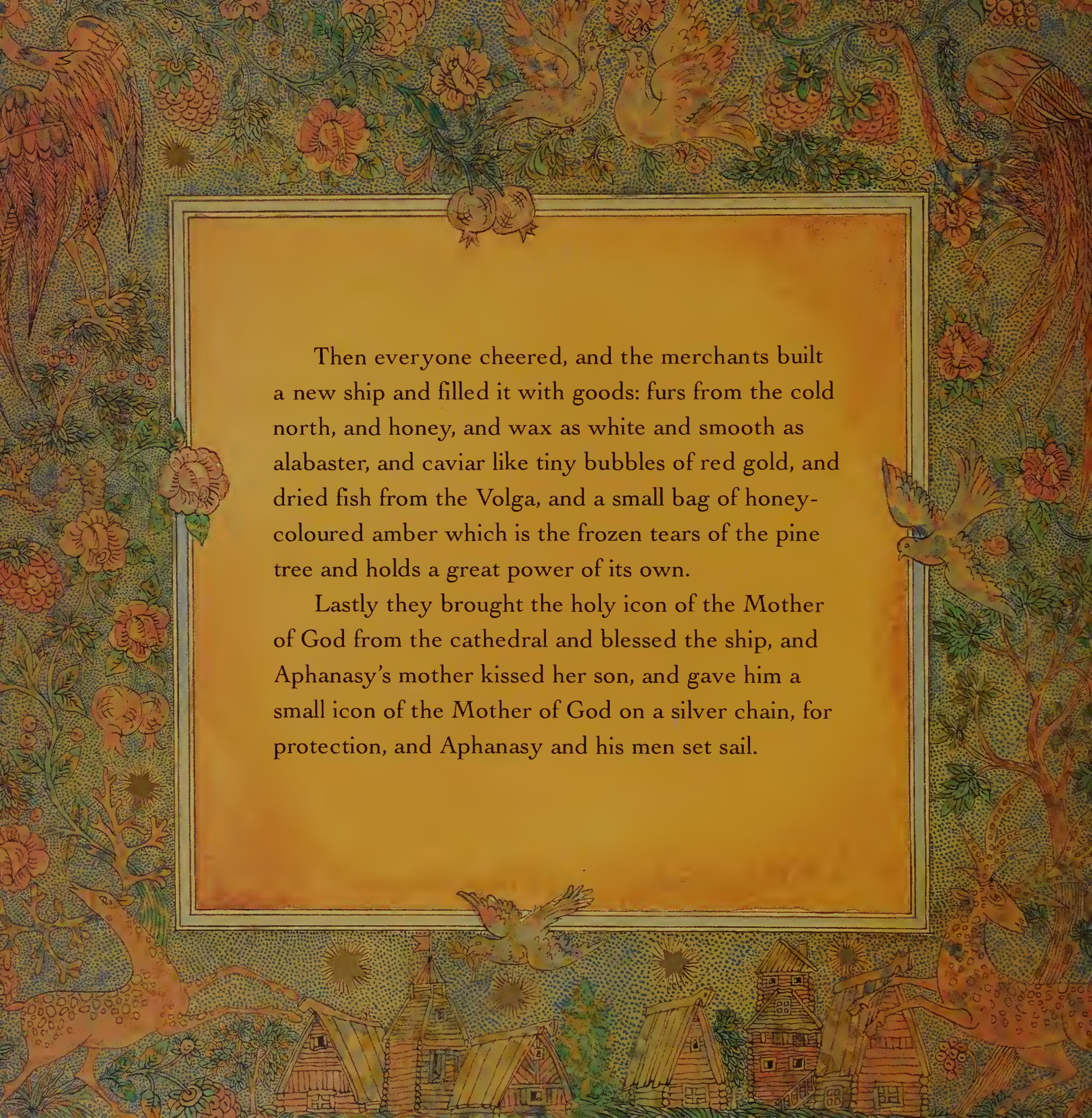
Odnazhdy . . .

Once upon a time and far away

in old Russia there was a great and rich trading city called Nizhny Novgorod. It sat on the banks of the mighty river Volga, and every year the merchants sent their wooden ships to trade at towns and cities near and far. But, far beyond the farthest city they had reached, lay a land where no one had ever been. India. The merchants had heard tales of wonder and magic about this faraway land, but they had heard, too, that it was a land of a thousand gods and demons, and they were a little afraid to sail to such a far and terrible place.

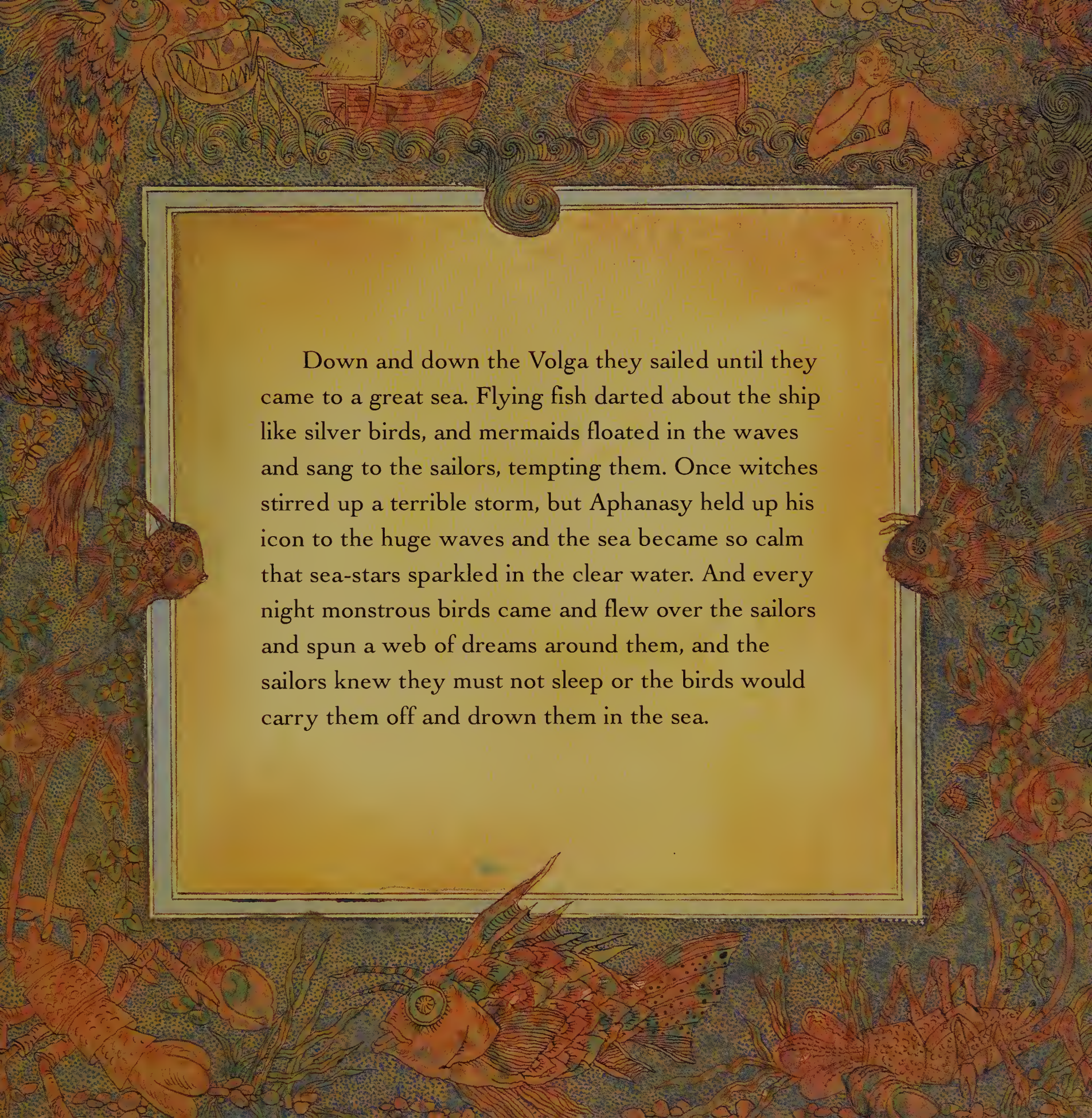


So one day they called together all the townspeople. They gathered in the bazaar and everyone talked and argued until at last old Nikitin, the most daring of the merchants, said, 'I have a son, young Aphanasy, who is bold and cheerful and wise beyond his years. And, best of all, he is lucky. Since I am too old to go myself, let us send Aphanasy to India.'

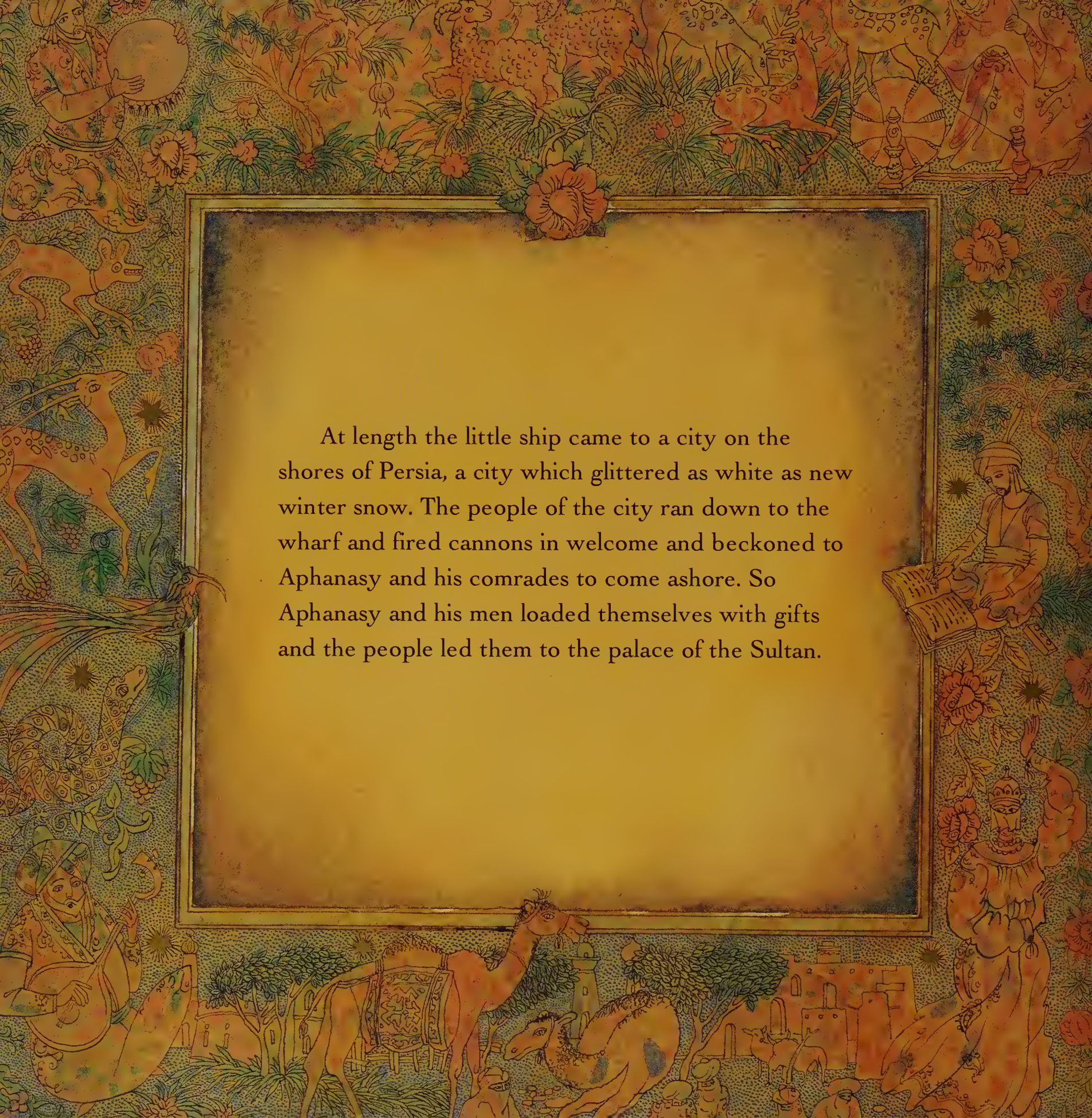


Then everyone cheered, and the merchants built a new ship and filled it with goods: furs from the cold north, and honey, and wax as white and smooth as alabaster, and caviar like tiny bubbles of red gold, and dried fish from the Volga, and a small bag of honey-coloured amber which is the frozen tears of the pine tree and holds a great power of its own.

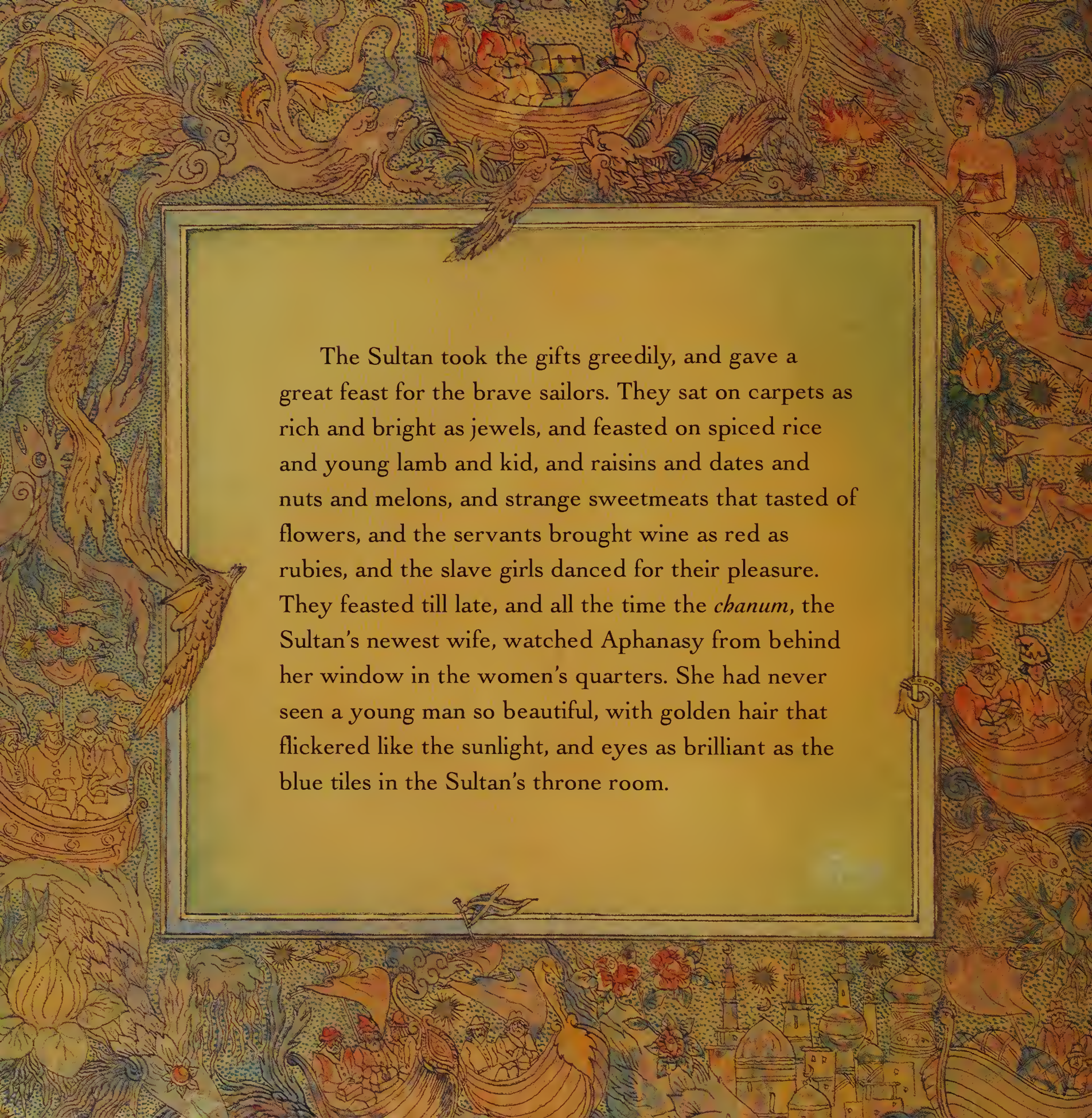
Lastly they brought the holy icon of the Mother of God from the cathedral and blessed the ship, and Aphanasy's mother kissed her son, and gave him a small icon of the Mother of God on a silver chain, for protection, and Aphanasy and his men set sail.



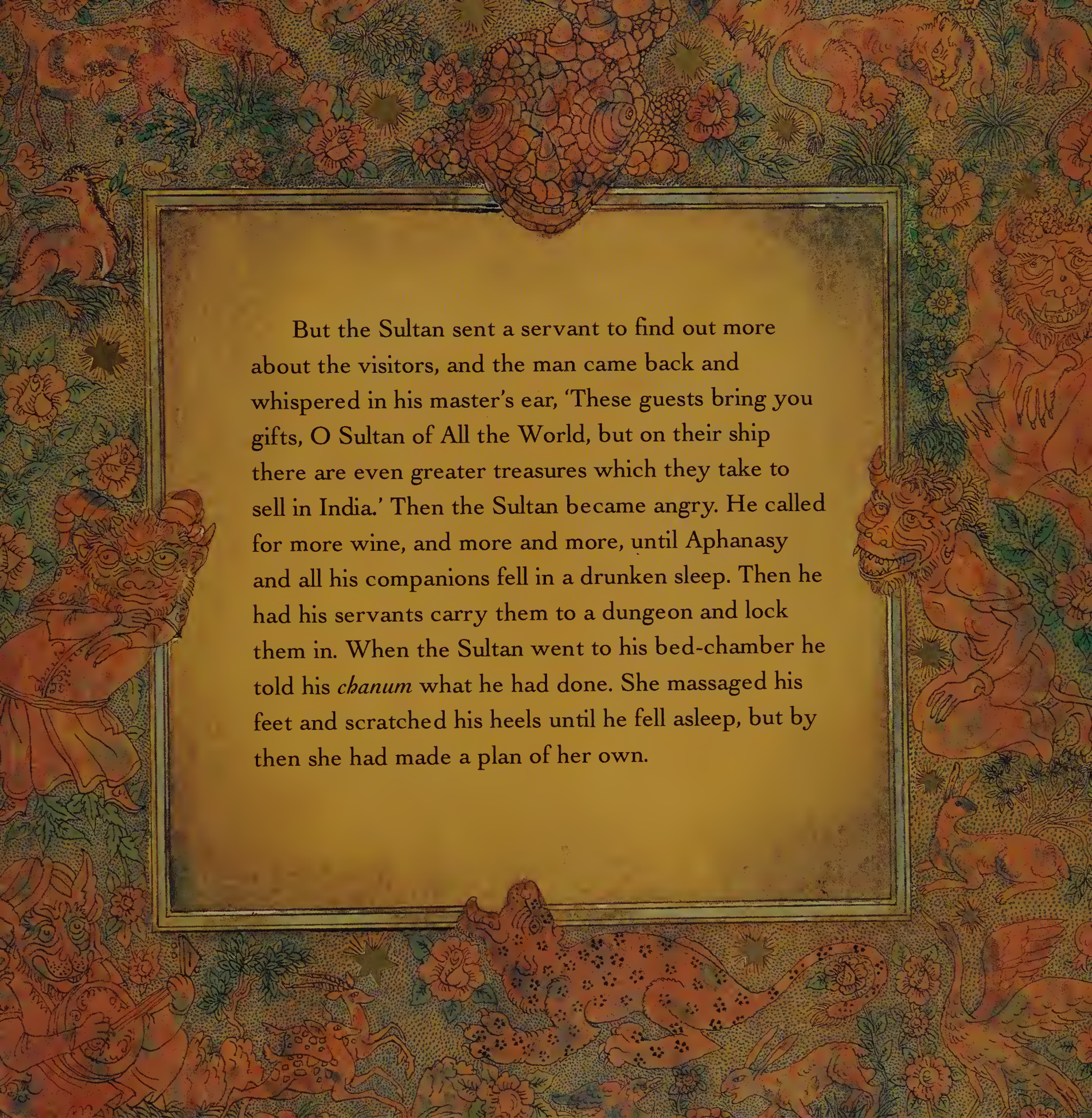
Down and down the Volga they sailed until they came to a great sea. Flying fish darted about the ship like silver birds, and mermaids floated in the waves and sang to the sailors, tempting them. Once witches stirred up a terrible storm, but Aphanasy held up his icon to the huge waves and the sea became so calm that sea-stars sparkled in the clear water. And every night monstrous birds came and flew over the sailors and spun a web of dreams around them, and the sailors knew they must not sleep or the birds would carry them off and drown them in the sea.



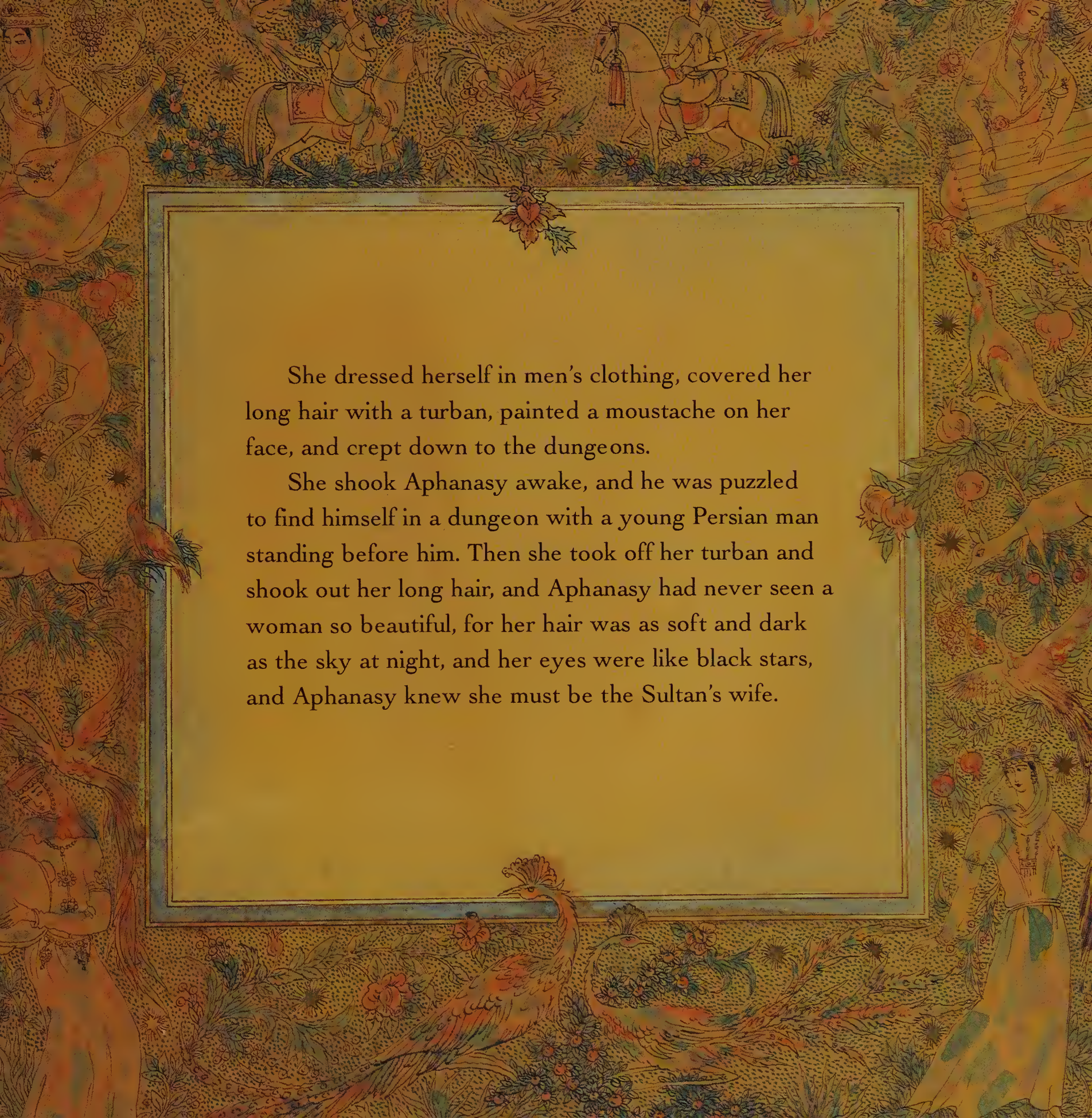
At length the little ship came to a city on the shores of Persia, a city which glittered as white as new winter snow. The people of the city ran down to the wharf and fired cannons in welcome and beckoned to Aphanasy and his comrades to come ashore. So Aphanasy and his men loaded themselves with gifts and the people led them to the palace of the Sultan.



The Sultan took the gifts greedily, and gave a great feast for the brave sailors. They sat on carpets as rich and bright as jewels, and feasted on spiced rice and young lamb and kid, and raisins and dates and nuts and melons, and strange sweetmeats that tasted of flowers, and the servants brought wine as red as rubies, and the slave girls danced for their pleasure. They feasted till late, and all the time the *chanum*, the Sultan's newest wife, watched Aphanasy from behind her window in the women's quarters. She had never seen a young man so beautiful, with golden hair that flickered like the sunlight, and eyes as brilliant as the blue tiles in the Sultan's throne room.

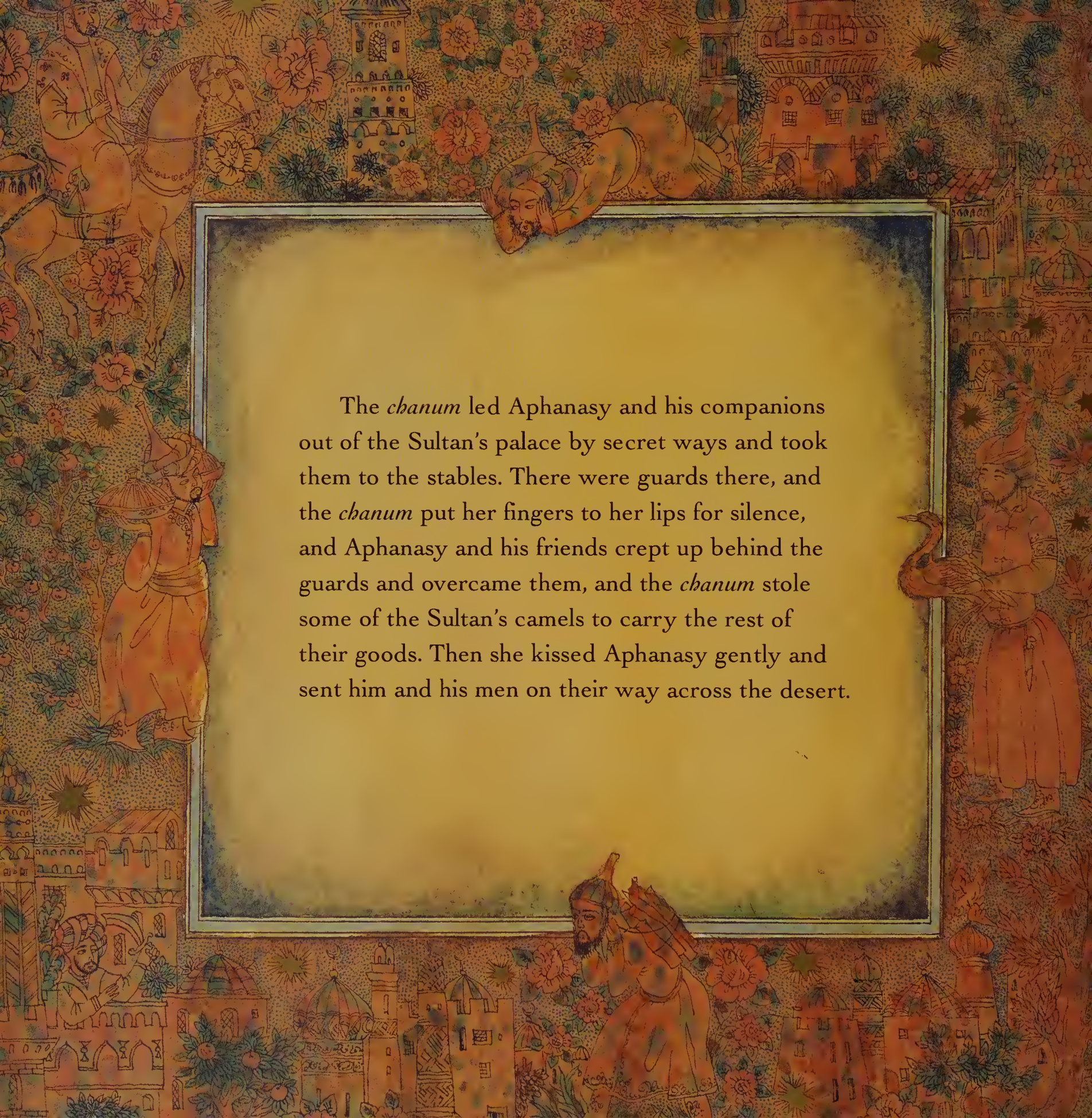


But the Sultan sent a servant to find out more about the visitors, and the man came back and whispered in his master's ear, 'These guests bring you gifts, O Sultan of All the World, but on their ship there are even greater treasures which they take to sell in India.' Then the Sultan became angry. He called for more wine, and more and more, until Aphanasy and all his companions fell in a drunken sleep. Then he had his servants carry them to a dungeon and lock them in. When the Sultan went to his bed-chamber he told his *chanum* what he had done. She massaged his feet and scratched his heels until he fell asleep, but by then she had made a plan of her own.

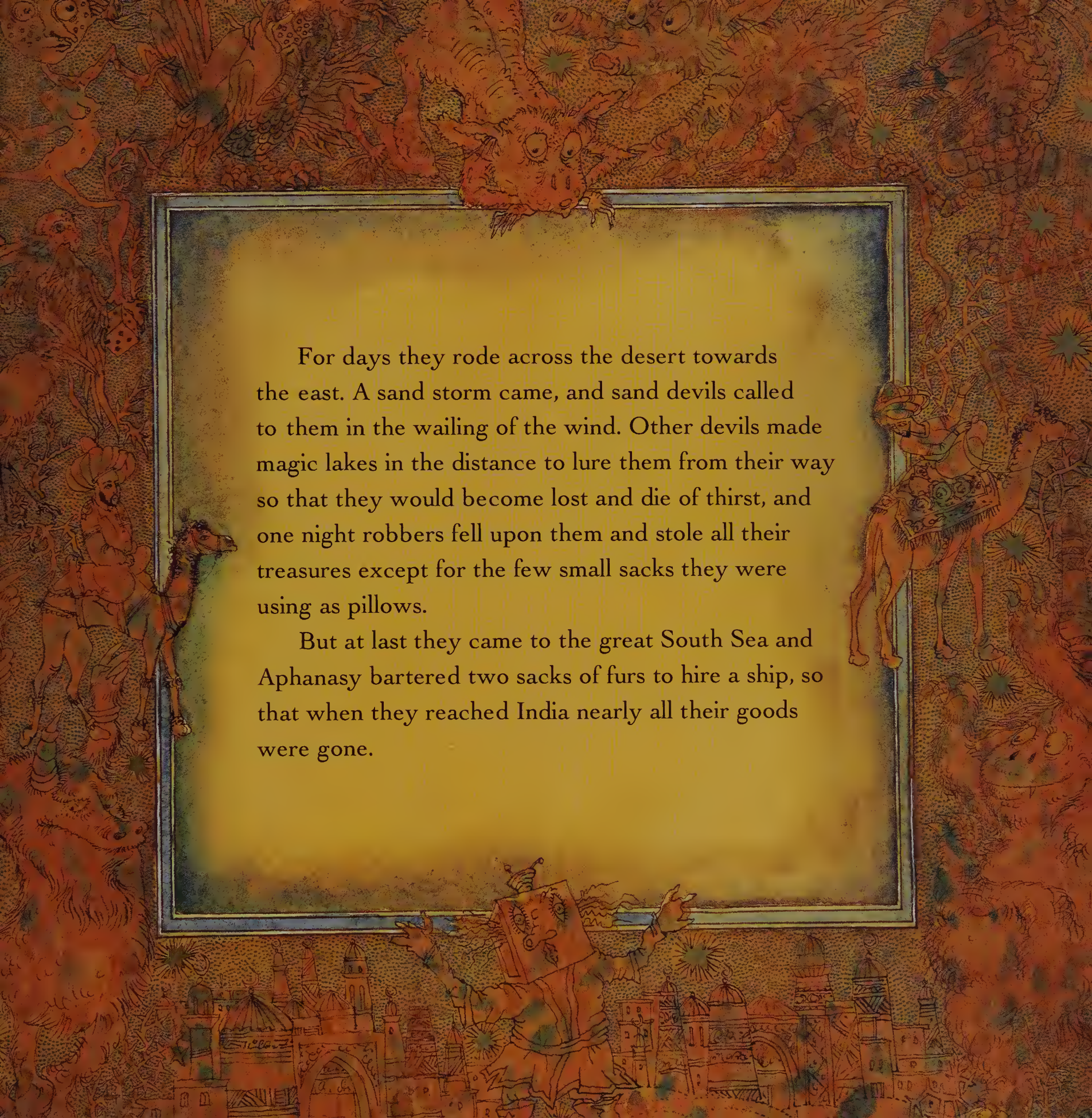


She dressed herself in men's clothing, covered her long hair with a turban, painted a moustache on her face, and crept down to the dungeons.

She shook Aphanasy awake, and he was puzzled to find himself in a dungeon with a young Persian man standing before him. Then she took off her turban and shook out her long hair, and Aphanasy had never seen a woman so beautiful, for her hair was as soft and dark as the sky at night, and her eyes were like black stars, and Aphanasy knew she must be the Sultan's wife.



The *chanum* led Aphanasy and his companions out of the Sultan's palace by secret ways and took them to the stables. There were guards there, and the *chanum* put her fingers to her lips for silence, and Aphanasy and his friends crept up behind the guards and overcame them, and the *chanum* stole some of the Sultan's camels to carry the rest of their goods. Then she kissed Aphanasy gently and sent him and his men on their way across the desert.



For days they rode across the desert towards the east. A sand storm came, and sand devils called to them in the wailing of the wind. Other devils made magic lakes in the distance to lure them from their way so that they would become lost and die of thirst, and one night robbers fell upon them and stole all their treasures except for the few small sacks they were using as pillows.

But at last they came to the great South Sea and Aphanasy bartered two sacks of furs to hire a ship, so that when they reached India nearly all their goods were gone.

India was truly full of marvels. They saw snakes that danced to the music of pipes, and men who swallowed fire and spat it out again. They watched in amazement as little boys swarmed up ropes and disappeared into nowhere, saw their bodies thrown down in pieces and then, a miracle, gaped as the boys reappeared whole and unharmed. And Aphanasy marvelled at holy men who slept on the sharpest of nails as easily as he slept on his feather mattress at home in Nizhny Novgorod.

But there were robbers too, and while Aphanasy and his friends gazed in wonder, thieves snatched their last few sacks of merchandise and fled into the maze of the bazaar. All they had left now was the small bag of amber which Aphanasy carried on a thong around his neck.

At that moment the Maharaja and his guards came riding by on their way to the temple. Aphanasy flung himself in the dust in front of the Maharaja's elephant, but the Maharaja was angry at being stopped on his way to prayer. He shouted an order to his mahout, who tickled the elephant in a special place behind its great ears, and the elephant wrapped its trunk around Aphanasy and held him prisoner.

Once again Aphanasy and his comrades were thrown into a dungeon. At first they wept for they were alone and friendless and without money in a strange country. But then Aphanasy remembered the holy icon, and he took it out and he and his men prayed fervently to the Mother of God for help.

The next morning they were brought before the Maharaja. Aphanasy told his story, and of the wonders of Russia. He told of rivers which became roads of ice in winter, so strong that sleighs and horses drove across them; and of the many-coloured lights dancing like cold flames in the northern sky. And he begged the Maharaja to accept his honey-coloured amber, for it would guard him from evil.

Then the Maharaja loaded Aphanasy with gifts of silk and ivory and gold and perfumes and lengths of cotton cloth as fine as mist, and spices that made Aphanasy's nose tingle, and lapis lazuli the colour of Aphanasy's eyes. Last of all he gave him a peacock-feather fan whose many eyes would watch for danger.

And so Aphanasy and his friends sailed safely home.

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